Plain

THE JUVENILE DRAMA,

Colored

or,

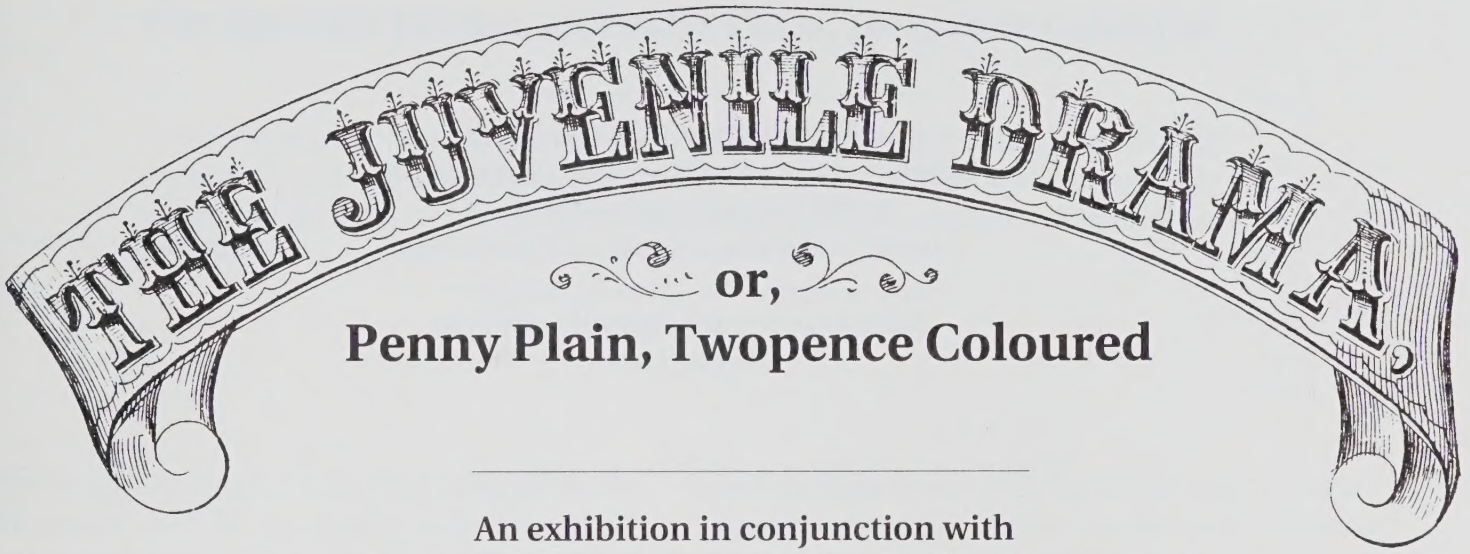
Penny Plain, Twopence Coloured

The Juvenile Drama,
or, Penny Plain, Twopence Coloured

MADAME AURIOL AS COLUMBINE.

46.

London Published by J. REDINGTON, 73 Hoxton Street, Formerly called 208 Hoxton Old Town.



or,

Penny Plain, Twopence Coloured

An exhibition in conjunction with
a conference of the American Society for Theater Research,
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the Association for Canadian Theatre History /
Association d'Histoire du Théâtre au Canada

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The Blue Jackets

The Juvenile Drama, or, Penny Plain, Twopence Coloured

"... the toy theatre, – there it is, with its familiar proscenium, and ladies in feathers, in the boxes! – and all its attendant occupation with paste and glue, and gum, and water colours, in the getting up of the Miller and his Men, and Elizabeth, or the Exile of Siberia."

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Tree*

A favourite amusement in the Victorian nursery, the toy theatre had, by the mid-nineteenth century, been introduced into almost every middle-class British home where it had become a pleasant pastime for school-age children. Pocket money was used to buy sheets of characters and scenery for a favourite play and then many happy hours were spent putting it all together, perhaps finally to entertain a captive family audience with a performance on a Pollock or Skelt stage. Of course, not many coloured and mounted sheets culminated in a performance. In his famous essay on the toy theatre, "A penny plain, twopence coloured", R.L. Stevenson wrote "... nor could any child twice court the tedium, the worry and the long-drawn-out disenchantment of an actual performance". All the fun was in anticipating the purchase and in the colouring, cutting out and pasting that followed. Yet, by 1884 when Stevenson published his essay, the popularity of the English toy theatre was already on the wane. Even though Charlie Chaplin, Winston Churchill and Gordon Craig remembered, as children, having played with their own toy theatres, it was with a toy that was essentially Regency in character. Every play that was ever published for the toy theatre had at one time been a London stage hit, but a hit from the first part of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century those romances, melodramas and spectacles had given

way to a theatre of realism. The toy theatre had become old-fashioned, and its popularity could not be sustained.

The toy theatre did not appear ready-made for children. In fact, initially, the sheets were not even sold in toy shops, but only in print shops, or the shops of theatrical stationers. The toy theatre evolved gradually over several decades, probably the fortunate result of the confluence of several circumstances. One of these was the introduction of paper toys to the nursery by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. They included water-colour painting books, cut-out paper dolls, and character books with moveable heads and bodies, and flap-picture books, or "turn-ups", which outlined the antics and adventures of Harlequin. Children who later played with a toy theatre were by then well trained in the use of paint, scissors, and paste. At the same time, there was a growing public demand for take-home mementos from the London stage-hits of the day. The theatre played a large part in the upbringing of children from ordinary middle-class and well-to-do families, and children as young as twelve were not infrequent visitors to the theatre. It soon became something of a fad for the adolescents, the "juveniles", to collect these souvenir portraits. When it became evident how popular they had become, it was not long before someone thought of offering more than one character from a single play on one sheet. Soon all the characters were included. Scenery was quick to follow, and a playbook was added. Finally, the stage on which the whole play could be performed completed the adult theatre in miniature. The "juvenile drama" had arrived.

In the early days of the juvenile drama, the sheets of characters and scenery were engraved with meticulous care and with attention to accuracy of detail. The characters could be easily identified as the real actors and actresses of the actual stage performance, and frequently their names appeared on the sheet beside the name of the character they portrayed. Each sheet sold for one penny plain, to be coloured at home, or for twopence if it had been coloured at the shop. As some plays grew to several sheets of characters, in several changes of costume and dramatic poses, with a variety of scenery and wings, on top of the price of a specially edited playbook, the acquisition of complete plays became an expensive hobby. Adolescents with the most generous allowances were finding the "juvenile drama" to

HODGSON'S SCENES IN ALADDIN. *Third & Twelfth.*

Published Jan.y 2.nd 1832, by O. HODGSON, 10, Cloth Fair, London.

be beyond their pockets. A few enterprising publishers, notably the Skelt family (1840-1872), recognized the problem and began to offer for sale smaller sheets of plays at half the price. But with the reduced size and price also came a decline in artistic quality. The drawings became less accurate and the colouring less sophisticated. The juvenile drama was passed down to younger siblings in the nursery where such attention to detail was not as important. It had now become a children's toy.

The English toy theatre flourished mainly between the years 1810 and 1860. During those years, there were many small firms publishing a large number of different plays. Some of those plays were popular enough to be reissued in a great many editions. By the latter part of the century, there were only a few publishers still at work, namely, Benjamin Pollock (1856-1937), the Skelt family, W.G. Webb (1820-1890), and his son, H.J. Webb (1852-1933). They continued to reissue "old favourites"; there were few new plays added to the toy theatre repertoire.

Today the toy theatre remains a lively and colourful historical monument to the British theatre of the early nineteenth century. A changing adult theatre; new, more exciting forms of entertainment for children, such as the cinema; poorly printed sheets; more formal schooling and consequently, homework, all contributed to the demise of the toy theatre. Yet nostalgic memories of past magic and romance still linger in those brightly coloured cardboard figures that move silently across a miniature stage in their wooden slides.

CASE 1 Theatrical Portraits

While it is unclear exactly how the toy theatre began, it is generally thought to have evolved, in part, from the publication of full-length portraits of well-known actors and actresses. Artists such as Robert Dighton and George Cruikshank would draw these actors and actresses directly from the stage in dramatic poses in the roles for which they were best known. The figures were then printed and offered for sale to stage-struck youth. It became an entertaining leisure activity for these young people to collect the portraits of their favourite actors or actresses. Later, at home, they might paint or decorate them. The decoration was not simple; bits of velvet and silk,

spangles and tinsel (coloured foil) were used to embellish the portrait and at the same time, create something entirely different. In the end, the prints became no more than background for the glitter of the decoration. Characters from plays with drab costumes and female characters were not popular. Lacking buttons, epaulettes, shields, gauntlets and swords, their portraits offered no scope for creative, sparkling decoration. On display are several examples of full-length portraits, both plain and coloured, of actors and actresses in dramatic poses. There is also a partially tinselled combat scene, and scenes from two plays, *The Miller and His Men* and *Timour the Tartar* which are fully tinselled and displayed as dioramas.

CASE 2 Early Sheets of Characters

Before long, someone thought of putting more than one portrait on a single sheet, perhaps the leading characters from one play. The credit is usually given to William West (1783-1854), because such a sheet, published by him in1811, still survives. In 1834, John Kirby Green (1790-1860), was describing himself on his published sheets as the original inventor of the juvenile drama. A book of words to a play proclaimed him to be "The Original Inventor and Publisher of Juvenile Theatrical Prints, Established 1808". As he had been working for West until 1812, and then had suddenly disappeared for two decades, it is difficult to say who actually came up with the idea. Perhaps West invented it, but Green saw the future possibilities in those juvenile theatrical prints. At this early stage, the drawing was still accurate, and the characters could be easily identified with real people; but by mid-century, the faces had merged into a common mould. As scenery and playbooks were added, interest in the plays themselves became greater than in the actors and actresses who had initially made the plays famous. Displayed are several examples of early sheets of multiple characters, including *Guy Fawkes*, published by Hodgson in 1822, and *Blue Beard*, published by West in 1824. There is as well the *Procession of the Coronation of George IV* in 6 sheets, published by West in 1822. This is an example of the grand spectacle that audiences liked to attend and purchase as a souvenir afterwards. Also exhibited are examples of orchestra pits, a drop-front, and a stage front, which were purchased to make a miniature stage more realistic.

POLLOCK'S
CHARACTERS & SCENES
IN THE
FORTY THIEVES.
12 Plates Characters. 15 Scenes & Set Pieces
6 Pl. Wings Nos 3, 7, 9 10 11
A Book Written for the Above
Fairy of the Lake
Gossamer
Sylph
Sylph
Sylph
Sylph
Ali Baba
Sylph
London Published by B Pollock, 73, Hoxton Street, Hoxton

CASE 3 Pantomime

The pantomime, a curious mixture of ballet and fantasy, has always been an adult entertainment. It began with the retelling of a classical legend, popular tale or well-known incident accompanied by costly scenic and elaborate musical effects. A dance-drama in mime followed, which told the familiar story of Harlequin attempting to elope with Columbine while her father, Pantaloon, pursued them through scenes that reflected the tastes and topics of the day. In time, the scope of the beginning changed, and almost any subject which could be treated farcically or in a burlesque fashion was used. At first, Harlequin was played as a comic figure, but, through the influence of the actor Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837), known traditionally as the funniest of clowns, the role of the Clown grew to become pre-eminent. Harlequin was romanticized to become Columbine's lover, and now the Clown and Pantaloon introduced most of the comic antics on stage. By the end of the nineteenth century, pantomimes had grown into full-length productions and were no longer simply "afterpieces" to a five-act melodrama or tragedy. It was about this time, too, that the subjects of the stories for pantomimes were being selected so as to be suitable even for very young children. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the pantomime had changed so much that it was now completely identified as a children's entertainment, and, moreover, an entertainment that was offered primarily at Christmas. On display are examples of two universally loved pantomimes, *The Sleeping Beauty*, published by Webb, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, published by Pollock.

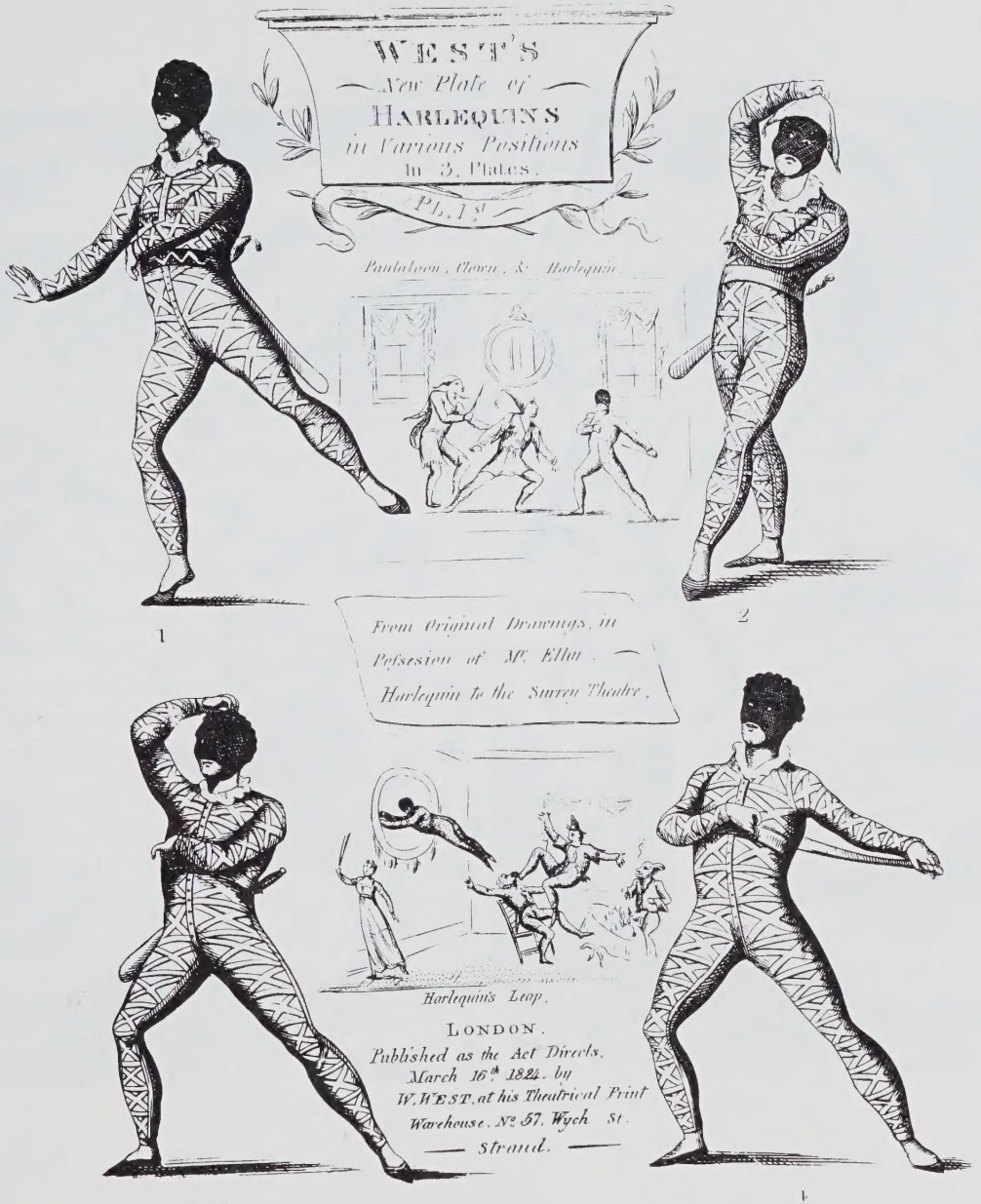
CASE 4 Melodramas

In common with audiences of today, the Regency and early Victorian theatre-goers did not enjoy attending the theatre in order to see their own problems displayed before them. They wanted an escape from the monotony of their everyday lives; they wanted colour, excitement, romance, and mystery; they wanted to escape to unfamiliar places where strange things might happen. Novelists were already writing stories with themes of wrongly accused heroes, long-suffering heroines, often held in captivity, or cold-blooded villains. These were sto-

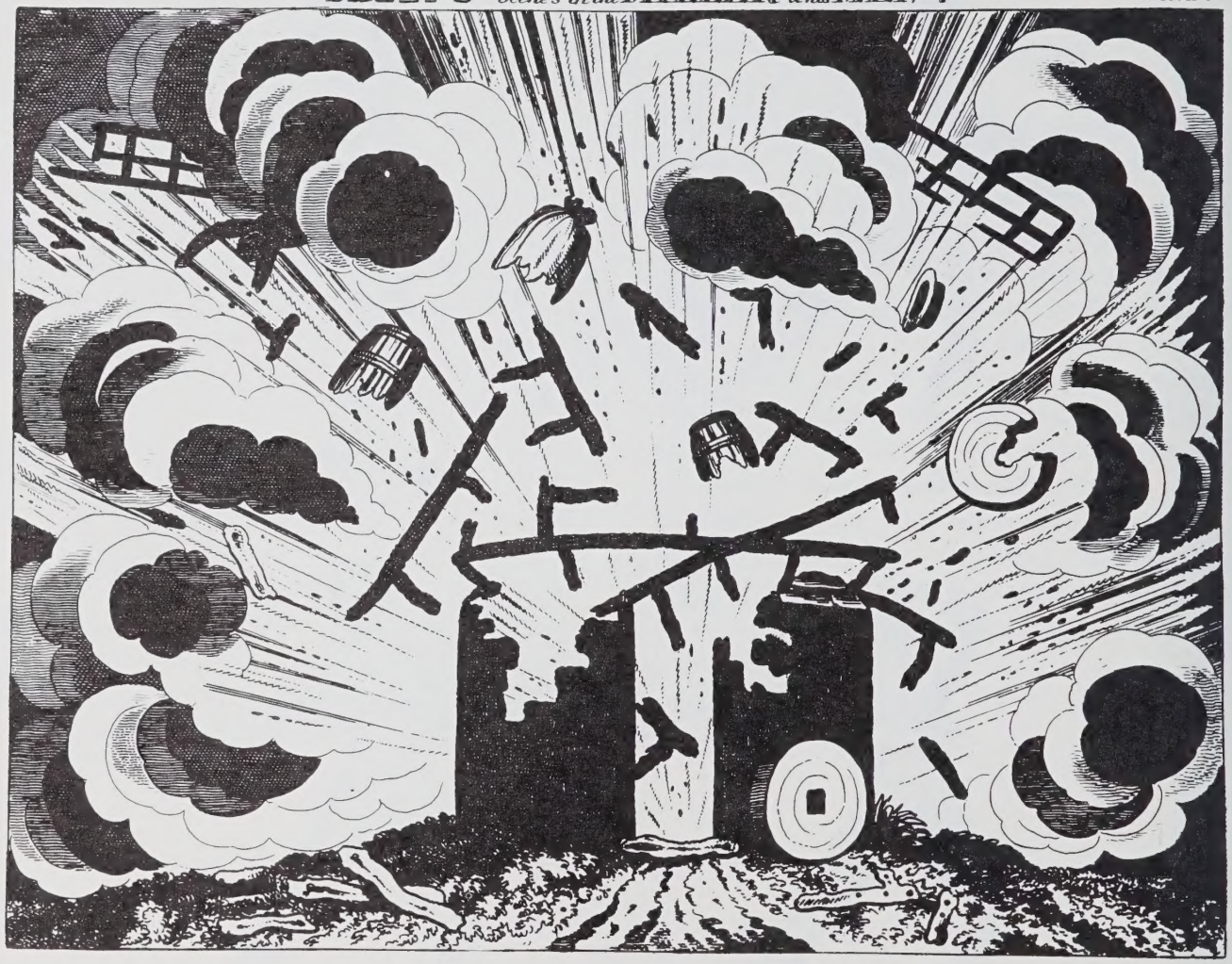
ries in which virtue was rewarded and crime punished, and many of them were then adapted for the stage. The romantic novels of Sir Walter Scott inspired many stage adaptations, which then found their way onto the miniature stage. One of these, *Montrose*, with sheets by West and a large scene by Hodgson, is on display in this case. Later in the century, the popular realistic novels of Charles Dickens inspired dramatic adaptations in a more contemporary setting. *Oliver Twist*, displayed with sheets by Pollock, is one such example. The French dramatist, Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1773-1844), described by his contemporaries as the "Corneille of Melodrama", wrote more than fifty plays, several of which were translated into English for the real stage. One of these plays, *Robinson Crusoe*, as published by West and Skelt, is exhibited. Finally, sheets published by Pollock from the play *The Battle of Waterloo* have been exhibited. This play is an extended melodrama because it is also a pageant. As a patriotic battle play, it outlived the more contemporary interest of others of its kind.

CASE 5 Farces

A farce is an extreme form of comedy which depends on unsophisticated humour, a sentimental plot, and the use of horse-play and bodily assault in order to elicit laughter. Farces were popular on the British stage of the early Victorian period as the "afterpiece" on a bill which also included a five-act drama. While these were essentially ephemeral productions, they could become quite successful through the acting of a particular comedian. Although they were included as slight fillers to off-set the heavier fare of the evening, farces were immensely popular with audiences. Exhibited are examples of two very successful Victorian farces, *Cinderella*, published by Pollock, and *The Blue Jackets*, with sheets by Mathews and Pollock and cut-out characters by Redington.


WEST'S
New Plate of
HARLEQUINS
in Various Positions
in 3 Plates.
Pl. 1st
Pantaloon, Clown, & Harlequin
1
2
From Original Drawings, in
Possession of Mr. Elliot, —
Harlequin to the Surrey Theatre.
Harlequin's Leap.
LONDON.
Published as the Act Directs,
March 16th 1824. by
W. WEST, at his Theatrical Print
Warehouse. No 57, Wych St.
— Strand. —
3
4

SKELT'S *Scenes in the* MILLER & his MEN. *Scene 7*



Pub. by M. & M. SKELT, 11, Swan st Minories, London.

CASE 6 The Exotic

Exciting Eastern spectacles were very popular on the real stage. The stories were certainly not originally intended for children, but the colour, mystery and excitement surrounding unfamiliar people who lived in faraway places which attracted adult audiences were just as compelling for children.These plays were quickly transferred to the miniature stage. One such play, *Timour the Tartar,* appears to have been the first play published for the juvenile drama. In April 1812, William West published some sheets of characters from this play with several sheets of scenery, each plate of scenery having wings at the side. It remains unclear whether or not the play was meant to be put together and then performed. It is certain, however, that by 1812 these theatrical engravings had become more than attractive pictures. *Timour the Tartar,* by John Redington (1819-1875), is displayed here with his characters already cut-out. Two other well-known plays with an Eastern theme are also displayed in this case: *Aladdin,* with sheets by Hodgson, Green, Skelt and Pollock, and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,* with sheets by West, Hodgson, Redington and Pollock.

CASES 7 and 8 *The Miller and His Men*

On the real stage, as on the miniature stage, one of the greatest drawing cards was the "blood-and-thunder" drama, which made great use of flashing swords and clanging armour in exciting combat scenes. Such plays held great appeal for young children in the nursery. The most popular of these was *The Miller and His Men,* first produced at Covent Garden on 21 October 1813 as an afterpiece to *Venice Preserv'd.* As a play for the toy theatre, it remained in demand for over a century, in part because of the big explosion in the final scene. Any play which included an explosion was sure to be as popular on the miniature stage as on the real stage. William West, in an interview with Henry Mayhew in 1850, said that he "wore out a whole set of copper plates doing Miller". He also stated that he had sold over 5,000 copies of the play "because of the explosion". He himself recommended using varnish "to bring it off". Sheets from *The Miller* as published by five different publishers throughout the nineteenth century – West, Hodgson, Park, Skelt and Webb – are displayed in Case 7.

Exhibited in Case 8 is a large wooden stage on which is mounted the scenery and figures for the final scene in *The Miller and His Men*: the explosion at the mill. The characters and scenery used here are from sheets originally published by W.G. Webb which he copied from a production of *The Miller and His Men* performed at the Haymarket in 1861. In 1926 the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild mounted a special exhibition to honour Webb in an attempt to bring the Juvenile Drama back into the public eye. About this time, Dr. Hughes of Broadstairs, Kent, a member of the Guild, built this large stage and all the accompanying stage sets. Each scene is built and mounted on a wooden base for placing on the stage "ready-made" to avoid the tedious delay between scenes. Some of the sets have been elaborately fitted out with electricity. There are separate sets of characters permanently fixed on wooden slides for use with each scene.

East and West Reading Room Cases

A variety of material is exhibited in these cases. They include examples of sheets, both cut and uncut, of the juvenile drama from countries outside Britain, examples from the "shadow pantomime", and modern editions of plays for the toy theatre.